

# Characteristics of an Effective Health Education Curriculum

Today's state-of-the-art health education curricula reflect the growing body of research that emphasizes:

- Teaching functional health information (essential knowledge).
- Shaping personal values and beliefs that support healthy behaviors.
- Shaping group norms that value a healthy lifestyle.
- Developing the essential health skills necessary to adopt, practice, and maintain health-enhancing behaviors.

Less effective curricula often overemphasize teaching scientific facts and increasing student knowledge. An effective health education curriculum has the following characteristics, according to reviews of effective programs and curricula and experts in the field of health education <sup>1-14</sup>:

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## Focuses on clear health goals and related behavioral outcomes.

An effective curriculum has clear health-related goals and behavioral outcomes that are directly related to these goals. Instructional strategies and learning experiences are directly related to the behavioral outcomes.

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## Is research-based and theory-driven.

An effective curriculum has instructional strategies and learning experiences built on theoretical approaches (for example, social cognitive theory and social inoculation theory) that have effectively influenced health-related behaviors among youth. The most promising curriculum goes beyond the cognitive level and addresses health determinants, social factors, attitudes, values, norms, and skills that influence specific health-related behaviors.

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## Addresses individual values, attitudes, and beliefs.

An effective curriculum fosters attitudes, values, and beliefs that support positive health behaviors. It provides instructional strategies and learning experiences that motivate students to critically examine personal perspectives, thoughtfully consider new arguments that support health-promoting attitudes and values, and generate positive perceptions about protective behaviors and negative perceptions about risk behaviors.

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## Addresses individual and group norms that support health-enhancing behaviors.

An effective curriculum provides instructional strategies and learning experiences to help students accurately assess the level of risk-taking behavior among their peers (for example, how many of their peers use illegal drugs), correct misperceptions of peer and social norms, emphasizes the value of good health, and reinforces health-enhancing attitudes and beliefs.

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## Focuses on reinforcing protective factors and increasing perceptions of personal risk and harmfulness of engaging in specific unhealthy practices and behaviors.

An effective curriculum provides opportunities for students to validate positive health-promoting beliefs, intentions, and behaviors. It provides opportunities for students to assess their vulnerability to health problems, actual risk of engaging in harmful health behaviors, and exposure to unhealthy situations.

## Addresses social pressures and influences.

An effective curriculum provides opportunities for students to analyze personal and social pressures to engage in risky behaviors, such as media influence, peer pressure, and social barriers.

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## Builds personal competence, social competence, and self efficacy by addressing skills.

An effective curriculum builds essential skills — including communication, refusal, assessing accuracy of information, decision-making, planning and goal-setting, self-control, and self-management — that enable students to build their personal confidence, deal with social pressures, and avoid or reduce risk behaviors.

For each skill, students are guided through a series of developmental steps:

- a. Discussing the importance of the skill, its relevance, and relationship to other learned skills.
- b. Presenting steps for developing the skill.
- c. Modeling the skill.
- d. Practicing and rehearsing the skill using real-life scenarios.
- e. Providing feedback and reinforcement.

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## Provides functional health knowledge that is basic, accurate, and directly contributes to health-promoting decisions and behaviors.

An effective curriculum provides accurate, reliable, and credible information for usable purposes so students can assess risk, clarify attitudes and beliefs, correct misperceptions about social norms, identify ways to avoid or minimize risky situations, examine internal and external influences, make behaviorally relevant decisions, and build personal and social competence. A curriculum that provides information for the sole purpose of improving knowledge of factual information will not change behavior.

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## Uses strategies designed to personalize information and engage students.

An effective curriculum includes instructional strategies and learning experiences that are student-centered, interactive, and experiential (for example, group discussions, cooperative learning, problem solving, role playing, and peer-led activities). Learning experiences correspond with students' cognitive and emotional development, help them personalize information, and maintain their interest and motivation while accommodating diverse capabilities and learning styles. Instructional strategies and learning experiences include methods for

- a. Addressing key health-related concepts.
- b. Encouraging creative expression.
- c. Sharing personal thoughts, feelings, and opinions.
- d. Thoughtfully considering new arguments.
- e. Developing critical thinking skills.

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## Provides age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate information, learning strategies, teaching methods, and materials.

An effective curriculum addresses students' needs, interests, concerns, developmental and emotional maturity levels, experiences, and current knowledge and skill levels. Learning is relevant and applicable to students' daily lives. Concepts and skills are covered in a logical sequence.

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### Incorporates learning strategies, teaching methods, and materials that are culturally inclusive.

An effective curriculum has materials that are free of culturally biased information but includes information, activities, and examples that are inclusive of diverse cultures and lifestyles (such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical/mental ability, appearance, and sexual orientation). Strategies promote values, attitudes, and behaviors that acknowledge the cultural diversity of students; optimize relevance to students from multiple cultures in the school community; strengthen students' skills necessary to engage in intercultural interactions; and build on the cultural resources of families and communities.

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### Provides adequate time for instruction and learning.

An effective curriculum provides enough time to promote understanding of key health concepts and practice skills. Behavior change requires an intensive and sustained effort. A short-term or "one shot" curriculum, delivered for a few hours at one grade level, is generally insufficient to support the adoption and maintenance of healthy behaviors.

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### Provides opportunities to reinforce skills and positive health behaviors.

An effective curriculum builds on previously learned concepts and skills and provides opportunities to reinforce health-promoting skills across health topics and grade levels. This can include incorporating more than one practice application of a skill, adding "skill booster" sessions at subsequent grade levels, or integrating skill application opportunities in other academic areas. A curriculum that addresses age-appropriate determinants of behavior across grade levels and reinforces and builds on learning is more likely to achieve longer-lasting results.

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### Provides opportunities to make positive connections with influential others.

An effective curriculum links students to other influential persons who affirm and reinforce health-promoting norms, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Instructional strategies build on protective factors that promote healthy behaviors and enable students to avoid or reduce health risk behaviors by engaging peers, parents, families, and other positive adult role models in student learning.

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### Includes teacher information and plans for professional development and training that enhance effectiveness of instruction and student learning.

An effective curriculum is implemented by teachers who have a personal interest in promoting positive health behaviors, believe in what they are teaching, are knowledgeable about the curriculum content, and are comfortable and skilled in implementing expected instructional strategies. Ongoing professional development and training is critical for helping teachers implement a new curriculum or implement strategies that require new skills in teaching or assessment.

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